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Germanic Veterans of the Roman Army in Southern Scandinavia – Can We Identify Them?

Thomas GRANE

INTRODUCTION

It is well-known that the Romans used Germanic man-power in the army. We know this both from literary evidence and from stone-cut depictions like the monumental friezes on Trajan's and Marcus' columns. There are also grave stones commemorating soldiers and veterans of Germanic origin from the Roman army. Obviously, these Germanic veterans chose to stay and died within the Roman frontiers, but what about those veterans, who decided to pack their things and go home to their native tribes? Is it possible to identify them from the grave goods of Germanic graves or from Roman objects among settlement finds? How suited is the information available from literary and epigraphic sources to veterans within the Empire, when we study Germanic finds containing Roman objects? Will that information allow us to form valid hypotheses regarding homecoming Germanic veterans?

There are, however, a number of layers to the level of engagement with and dependence on the Roman army invested by Germanic warriors, which should be considered. One layer is constituted by veterans of a Roman military auxiliary unit. These soldiers joined a Roman unit and lost their independence until they were released from duty again. Other layers are constituted by allies or *foederati*, who acted on their own. This raises another question; can we separate the different layers in the archaeological remains?

This paper will address these questions investigating Germanic finds from southern Scandinavia.¹

CAN WE LOCATE THE GERMANIC VETERAN?

Until now, little attention has been devoted to the question of Germanic veterans. Therefore, it is dif-

ficult to give any clear answers. In 1999, Peter S. Wells briefly discussed the question of Germanic warriors serving in the *auxilia* in his book, *The Barbarians Speak*. He argued that large groups of Germanic warriors must have passed the Roman frontier to enter the Roman auxiliary troops (Wells 1999, 13-14, 90-91, 229, 234). At the Limes congress in Pécs in 2003, Simon James commented on this statement, arguing that Germanic warriors certainly did join the Roman army over the centuries, although not in the numbers suggested by Wells (James 2005, 275-277).

Apart from these minor comments, which do not go into great detail, the question of veterans, or rather Germanic warriors in Roman service, often pops up in the discussion of Germanic elite graves. One prominent example is the magnificent grave from Mušov in the Czech Republic. The grave, which is dated to the middle of the second century AD, contains by far the richest and most spectacular grave goods from the Roman Iron Age, even though it was robbed already in Antiquity. Based on a large number of arrowheads, the excavators suggest a role of the deceased as the head of a Roman auxiliary unit of archers (Droberjar / Peška 2002, 111-115). Other examples are the rich graves from the so-called Haßleben-Leuna horizon, which are richly equipped elite graves from the central Germanic region. Here, particularly the presence of the crossbow *fibula* is seen as a link to the Roman army, where it was used to fasten the officer's cloak. A third example comes from Bavaria from the gravesite of Berching-Pollanten, where presumably an Alammanic auxiliary soldier went home to be buried with a relatively modest grave ensemble with a number of bronze objects including spurs and a repaired *umbo* (Fischer 1988, 99).

¹ Southern Scandinavia covers present-day Denmark, Southern Sweden and the islands of Öland and Gotland.

One problem with identifying Germanic veterans lies in the fact that we have not clearly defined the different layers of Germanic warriors, who interacted with the Roman army. The graves from Mušov and Haßleben-Leuna represent the absolute top of Germanic society. They are definitely different from the more modest appearance of the warrior from Berching-Pollanten, who may very well have been the leader of his village, but not a major player on the political arena.

DEFINITIONS OF A GERMANIC VETERAN

The general definition of a veteran is an old soldier. Obviously, a Germanic veteran is also an old soldier in some way, but what else defines the Germanic veteran? This is the first issue that should be addressed. Basically, I see three levels of interaction, which will be listed here:

1. The direct parallel to the Roman veteran is a Germanic warrior, who is discharged from the Roman army after serving his time with a Roman auxiliary unit. This meant that he was now a Roman citizen with all the advantages that entailed for him and his family. This should be considered the lowest level of interaction.

2. Another way for Germanic warriors to interact with the Roman army was as an ethnic unit, in certain periods known simply as a *numerus*, a unit. Such a unit consisted of a band of Germanic warriors led by their own commander. They could be commissioned to join the army for a particular campaign, or employed to harass other Germanic tribes. Occasionally, such units were garrisoned at the Roman frontier.

3. The highest level of interaction would be the engagement for a particular or general purpose of Germanic leaders, whether we call them chieftains, princes or kings, something that is another discussion entirely. The purpose could be to keep the peace in general, to wage war on neighbouring tribes or to participate in battle alongside the Roman army. This must be considered a diplomatic level.

It is important to notice here that there is a difference between the three levels regarding rank and social/political status as well as the length of attachment to the Roman army.

WHO RETURNED TO GERMANIA?

Once we have established the levels of interaction, another question presents itself. Who returned home? This question mostly concerns level 1 and to some degree level 2. For level 3, this question is probably not so relevant, as the leaders of the Germanic societies would function from their base.

This question, however, only leads to more questions.

1. What social and political status would a retired veteran have in his home village, as he returns after perhaps several decades?

2. The *auxiliarius* had the lowest pay in the Roman army. How wealthy would a veteran of the *auxilia* be, when he was discharged after 20-25 years?

3. Depending on the answer to questions 1 and 2, would he be wealthy and important enough to secure a position in the top of society?

4. And lastly, how well could a Germanic warrior in Roman service be expected to preserve reasonable contacts to his home community?

These are all questions, which I will not even attempt to answer here. They are presented merely to illustrate that we will be dealing with a number of unknown factors, when we approach the questions concerning returning Germanic veterans and their significance.

THE MATERIAL

Based on these definitions of military interaction, one could argue that only level 1 would lead to what could be described as ordinary veterans of the army. In the following, however, I will pursue indications of all three levels.

So, what kind of physical or intellectual indicators for veterans do we have in the southern Scandinavia? For this region it is futile to look for concrete evidence, but we do have a number of indications that could hint at contacts with relation to the questions at issue here.

For regions within the limits of the Empire there is some evidence or indications for veterans such as gravestones, military diplomas and use of Roman building materials such as tiles and bricks. There are also small finds like elements of military outfits, textiles, utensils pointing towards a degree of literacy or simply the use of Roman pottery such as *terra sigillata*. Mostly, these indicators are absent in the material from southern Scandinavia.

Instead, there is a limited and specific range of military equipment, Roman vessels primarily of bronze and glass, some evidence of literacy, Roman coins and an occasional *terra sigillata* bowl.

MILITARY EQUIPMENT

The military equipment is mostly limited to swords and sword fittings. They appear primarily in the large weapon deposits in the bogs of eastern Jutland and Funen in Denmark, although a few swords are

found in graves. This type of find is found throughout the Roman Iron Age, but the most diverse Roman material comes from the sites of Thorsbjerg in northern Germany and Vimose on Funen. From Thorsbjerg we have several Roman helmets, pieces of mail armour, shield bosses and belt buckles. Among the finds from Vimose there is, for instance, an almost complete mail armour, a griffon's head and several types of gaming pieces. At other weapon deposit sites such as Illerup Ådal, Nydam and Ejsbøl, the Roman material is almost exclusively limited to sword blades and baldric fittings (Jørgensen et al. 2003, 406-409; Pauli Jensen forthcoming).

The Roman sword blade is difficult to use as an indicator, as it is found throughout *Barbaricum* in the entire period. As such, it should be disregarded, when it comes to indicators of veterans.

One piece of military equipment that is closely connected to the Roman army is the *pugio*. Outside the Roman frontier, only three examples have been found. One of these was found in a cremation grave at Hedegård in central Jutland (Madsen 1999, 74-83). The fact that it was found in a grave and not as a deposit is a strong indication that the deceased had dealings with the Roman army (Grane 2007, 85-88).

There are other finds that link to the Roman army in some way. From one of the weapon sacrifices at Illerup Ådal, we have an openwork baldric plate with an eagle and the inscription "*OPTIME MAXIME CON(serva)*". There are several parallels to this piece. One was found in the fort at Carlisle, UK. This plate was even made from the same die as the one from Illerup Ådal. From the fort at Zugmantel in the Taunus Mountains in the German state of Hessen, another plate was found along with strap fittings including the rest of the inscription which continues: "*NUMERUM OMNIUM MILITANTIUM*". Thus, the entire inscription more or less translates to: "Jupiter the best and greatest preserve all fighting men of the unit" (Stephenson 1999, 69-71).

From one of the deposits from Vimose Bog there are four more or less identical baldric fittings with a medallion in the centre. The centre of the medallion is an eagle standing on a globe with a wreath in the beak flanked by Roman standards. Next to the globe, the letters *I O M*, standing for *Iupiter Optimus Maximus*, are barely visible (Jørgensen et al. 2003, 409). From Vimose there is also an easily recognizable baldric of a *beneficiarius* (Pauli Jensen forthcoming).

Originally, all these baldric plates must have belonged to soldiers serving in the Roman army. The

find contexts, however, make an understanding of their wider context difficult. As the weapon sacrifices are seen as the result of intra Germanic affairs, the plates most likely did not originate from active Roman soldiers. Quite likely, they were worn by veterans, although they could also have been war booty.

ROMAN VESSELS

Not only in southern Scandinavia, but in most of *Germania*, Roman vessels, i.e. vessels produced somewhere within the Roman Empire, are an important part of the visual expression of power of the élite in the first four centuries AD. This type of object is mainly found in graves, whereas settlements in southern Scandinavia have produced next to no finds of Roman origin. It is important to note, however, that the presence of a Roman vessel in a grave is not in itself necessarily a sign that we are dealing with a former member of the élite. There are relatively poor graves, which contain just a Roman saucupan as the only object. Graves, which are richly furnished with objects made of precious metals, on the other hand, almost always include Roman vessels.

These vessels belong to the banquet sphere. There are drinking vessels of glass or silver and ladle and strainer sets, buckets and basins of bronze. Mostly, or in the richest graves at least, the vessels can be divided into a container for the liquid, a vessel to drink the liquid and a medium to transfer the liquid from the container to the drinking vessel. Often the Roman vessels are indiscriminately mixed with locally produced pottery vessels (Ekengren 2009, 209-217).

Is it possible to relate graves with Roman vessels to homecoming veterans? As we lack obvious indicators that link to the Roman army, this is very difficult. Furthermore, in at least half the rich graves, the deceased was a female, who definitely had not served in the Roman army. Clearly, Roman objects may change their significance, once that are used in a Germanic context, but for Roman objects in female graves to be linked with the army, they should be strong indicators like a *pugio* and not vessels linked with banquet sphere.

In an article from 2007, I presented a number of élite graves that could be construed as possible indicators of military-political or diplomatic contacts between the Romans and the Danish area (Grane 2007). I shall only briefly mention two of these graves here.

They are the founding graves of the power centre of Himlingøje on eastern Zealand (Lund

Hansen et al. 1995). Both were warriors that had been cremated. A Roman vessel had been used as the urn, and both graves had been marked by a barrow. The graves, dated to the middle of the second century AD, were richly equipped befitting a family, who were to dominate southern Scandinavia for the next couple of centuries. In one grave, the urn was a Roman saucepan, while the other was a *terra sigillata* bowl of the popular type Dragendorf 37. In both cases, I argued that we might see an indication of a relation to the Roman army (Grane 2007, 89-91). That these vessels had been chosen as urns indicates that they held a significant meaning either to the deceased or the bereaved. In the case of the saucepan, this type of vessel was linked to the Roman army, as it was standard Roman military equipment at this time. In the case of the *terra sigillata* bowl, the connection to the Romans is found in the fact that Roman pottery is not part of the ensemble of Roman vessels found in southern Scandinavia unlike certain other regions of the *Barbaricum*. Logically, the deceased got acquainted with it through the Romans.

If we continue with this hypothesis for the sake of the argument, how are these graves related to the question of homecoming veterans? It is of course difficult to say to which of the three levels they belong. Considering their social status in the community, it would make the most sense to place them in level 2 or 3. They were in a position to seize and hold power and to form relations to the Romans on a diplomatic level (Grane 2013, 39-42). This also relates to the wider question of how the Roman vessels arrived in southern Scandinavia. This is too complicated a question to deal more thoroughly with here, but one way that has been proposed is that the material mainly arrived with homecoming veterans rather than being a result of diplomatic relations. If it were only as easy, we would have an answer to our main question. Unfortunately, there are a number of factors that speak against this hypothesis. The distribution pattern of the Roman vessels is quite specific and there is a limited, but specific range of types of vessels, consisting mainly of the three types of vessels for the banquet mentioned above. If veterans were bringing the major part of the Roman objects home from a life inside the Roman Empire, one would expect much more variety. Another point, and this is important, is that elite centres such as the one at Himlingøje are not defined by the Roman imports alone, but just as much on local jewellery of gold and silver, something that is not considered by those favouring this hypothesis.

PAYMENT?

Another indication of some kind of contact is constituted by some of the coin finds from southern Scandinavia. The majority of the Roman coins come from hoards, many of them much younger than the Roman Iron Age, but a few of the hoards come from contexts, which allow us to form some hypotheses regarding their origin. Just one example will be presented here. It is a hoard from an Iron Age settlement in northern Jutland, at the village of Ginderup. It was deposited in the end of the first century AD in the floor of a house and consisted of 31 *denarii* and one *aureus*. The youngest coin was from the reign of Vespasian, and the composition resembled hoards from *Pompeii* and the Flavian *castellum* of Ludvigshafen-Rheingönheim, which indicates that the hoard was composed early in the Flavian period. Precisely, at the time of Vespasian, we see a veritable boom in Roman vessels in Scandinavia (Bjerg 2005, 125-128; Lund Hansen 1987, 198). Possibly, the development in the AD 70s can be related to the hoard from Ginderup, but once again the question of homecoming veterans will be difficult to answer. In fact, the presence of that large a number of coins rather indicates some sort of payment related to a diplomatic agreement, a pay-off of sorts?

INTELLECTUAL INDICATORS?

An example of a so-called intellectual indicator is found in the textile remains of a number of graves from the sites of Tornebuskehøj, Tjørring and Hammerum in central Jutland. The graves were all dated to the first century AD. In these graves there are pieces of textile that are woven in “half Panama”. This is a particular weaving technique, where threads woven across the main threads of the base cloth along the edge formed a slightly thicker band, usually in a different colour than the base cloth. The Romans used this weaving technique to create the *clavus* or band on Roman tunics and togas (Mannering 2012, 95-99). This type of weaving was completely foreign to the Germanic societies at this time. There is no doubt that the pieces of textile were locally produced, as the type of cloth used as the base differed from that which was used by the Romans. Therefore, there is no doubt that the pattern must have been inspired by Roman clothing. Did someone from the local community return to the village with a Roman tunic after some time in the Empire? Or did the Romans pass this area on the naval expedition under Augustus in AD 5?

Another form of intellectual indicator is the beginning of literacy in southern Scandinavia. This

area is where the earliest runic inscriptions are found. The Runic “alphabet”, the Futhark is not a transcription of Latin, but it is clear that the inspiration to create a Germanic written language came from the South. The earliest inscriptions are owner’s or maker’s names on small objects. An imitation of the Roman use of maker’s marks on, for instance, sword blades is seen on Germanic spearheads. Thus, the same runic name is found on spearheads from two different war booty sacrifices at Illerup Ådal and Vimose in Denmark. From the Thorsbjerg find, there is a shield boss with a Latin name and one with a runic name. This habit could certainly have been picked up by warriors serving in the Roman army (Imer 2007, 42-48).

A third example should be mentioned here, although the description “intellectual” may not actually apply. This concerns the import of animals. In the Roman Iron Age, new species like chickens and tame ducks and geese were introduced. Also the tame cat came to northern Europe with the Romans (Jensen 2003, 406-407). That these animals are yet another indication of the contacts between southern Scandinavia and the Roman Empire is certain, but whether they can be attributed to homecoming veterans is another matter.

Lastly, I shall return to the gravesite of Himlingøje. In the first half of the third century AD, a young man was inhumed with grave gifts appropriate to his status as a member of the leading family. This grave 1978-1 is particularly interesting due to the state of the anthropological material. It became clear during the excavation that the deceased had not been in one piece, when he was put in the grave. Although the bones of his body had been placed more or less correctly, some were upside down. Thus, for instance, the *fibulae* and *tibiae*, i.e. lower leg bones had been placed incorrectly with the upper parts at the feet, and the head had rolled down on the chest. For some reason, the body had been parted prior to the burial, possibly because it had to be transported over a greater distance. On top of the grave, the complete skeleton of an old dog was found. The remains of excrements showed that the dog had died on the grave. This dog was a Maremma sheep dog of Italian origin. A likely scenario is that the dog had been acquired from the Romans perhaps as a gift to the young prince. It is also a possibility that the young man brought it home from a stay in, or visit to, the Roman provinces (Grane 2007, 92). It has been suggested that this was a hunting dog, and that veterans

could have brought back the idea of breeding hunting dogs.² The fact that the skeleton has been identified as a sheep dog may rather indicate that it was used as a guard dog, though.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The simple answer to the question posed in the title: “Can we identify Germanic veterans of the Roman army in the archaeological material of southern Scandinavia?”, must be: Not with the present state of research. As it has now become apparent, no attempts were given to answer the question. Instead, the main question generated a number of other questions, which will hopefully be addressed in the future. I have tried to underline the important fact that we need to first identify, which level of military contact, we are dealing with. As stated above, we cannot just assume that most of the Roman objects came back with veterans, as it is necessary to include all the facts. Nor can we just assume that the most powerful Germanic king from Mušov served as the commander of merely a cohort. On the other hand, he may have served for a time in his youth. This is not unknown. Just think of Arminius, who had served as a Roman officer. When it comes to Germanic warriors serving in the Roman army, far too little is known about the actual circumstances. Germanic allies may have sent contingencies of warriors to serve for limited periods of time rather than the 25 to 30 years that was the norm for the auxiliaries.

I have presented a few examples, which indicate that something was going on. Particularly the baldric plates from the bog finds must signify some connection to the Roman army and they must have belonged to Roman soldiers at some point, but if these soldiers were Germanic is impossible to know. Also the textiles present a strong indication of contacts. Whether these contacts represent veterans or passing Romans, however, is impossible to say.

The two warriors laid to rest in the Roman vessels from Himlingøje could have made a career in the Roman army, but would they have had sufficient funds and contacts to establish themselves as masters on eastern Zealand?

The overall conclusion to this matter must remain that more work should be done before we can get any satisfying answers to the question whether we can identify Germanic veterans of the Roman army in the archaeological material of southern Scandinavia.

² Contribution to the discussion by Ortoft Harl at the congress in Ruse.

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